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*The Sheik* (Melford, 1921) and *The Son of the Sheik* (Fitzmaurice, 1926) are lavish tales of foreign lands and the barbarians that rule and inhabit such places. Each contain a romance narrative strand, daring rescues and sword fights on horseback. Most importantly in the context of this essay however, they both contain the actor and original movie icon, Rudolph Valentino. With all these elements combined, it becomes apparent that women are the movie-going demographic at which these films are aimed. Rather than

just being flights of fancy for female viewers however, both films seem to offer interestingly contrasting advice to women about their place in society, especially in relation to the governing patriarchal structures with which they are surrounded. I consider these works together due to the fact they share similar narrative elements, yet differ completely in respect to attitudes towards female spectatorship. Although *The Son of The Sheik* is a sequel to *The Sheik* and only a five year difference exists between their respective release, it would appear the intermediate years contain a

general shift in respect to the role of women as film characters as well as women as members of the viewing audience.

Valentino himself represents the changing attitudes in regards to female spectatorship of the time as well as the diametrically opposing attitudes towards film stars, ethnic minorities and sexuality, and it should be seen as significant that he was cast in both features. As Hansen states, 'Valentino's body, in more than one sense, became the site of contradictions that had erupted with World War I' (Hansen 6). Anderson also says that Valentino 'embodied the very

contradictions of the new celebrity culture' (Anderson 66). He was an Italian immigrant, his sexuality was often disputed by those who felt threatened by him and people's opinions of him ranged from seeing him as the epitome of masculinity to an over-emotional sap. A newspaper column from the 1920s reprinted in *Babel & Babylon; Spectatorship in American Silent* shows how many men of the time hated 'his classic nose...Roman face...smile...glistening teeth' as well as hating him because 'he's the great lover of the screen...he's leading man for Gloria Swanson...he's so good looking' (Hansen

258). Most interestingly however, many resisted Valentino's fame based on the fact he was seen as a 'woman-made man' (Studlar 287).

Fig. 1 Article from "Movie Weekly" highlighting Valentino's popularity

Men's dislike of Valentino is not justified, but becomes understandable when considered in this "woman-made man" framework as it reflected 'women's perverse search for a new model of masculinity that transgressed normative American models' (ibid). Valentino became such a star due to his dedicated female fan base on which he relied for financial

stability. He also became famous directly under the influence of a female screenwriter, June Mathis. His idolisation, through no work of his own, allowed him to become the ideal man for women spectators and the object of hate for male spectators. The cult surrounding Valentino epitomises the influence and significance of female spectatorship. By yearning for Valentino and supporting his film career, women of the period were essentially rewriting what it was to be a successful and desirable man in 1920s America. Through no work of their own, but by the unstoppable wave of female

desire, men found themselves suddenly inadequate and compared with the foreign dark lover Valentino. However, considering the loosening morality of the 1920s (Card 134) it is unclear whether this was just an inevitable process that Valentino acted as catalyst within rather than the actual agent which triggered the reaction.

Shifting our focus to the films *The Sheik* and *The Son of The Sheik*, we begin to see just how Valentino exerted such an influence on the female audience of the time. Financially, *The Sheik* was a great success described as 'setting

attendance records at several important downtown theatres in New York' (Anderson 66). On a structural level also, the film offers more than just audience appeasement often associated with commercially successful films. Audience identification in *The Sheik* is somewhat initially complicated as the female audience identifies with Valentino as the Sheik and the male audience with the female lead character Diana Mayo, played by Agnes Ayers. This is largely due to the fact that Valentino's character is presented like the vamp character present throughout silent cinema of the 1920s, the



mysterious out-of-towner who challenges the accepted norms of the area into which they enter. Diana, on the other hand, is the swashbuckling adventurer who rejects societal norms and goes in search of unexplored lands and 'claiming the masculine imperial privilege of visually penetrating the secluded spaces of the Arab world' (Anderson 67). When they encounter each other, Diana is subjected to the intense male gaze characteristic of Valentino (Fig. 2 above). Diana is objectified and therefore loses the autonomy she was earlier associated with. Valentino has now taken on the

role originally occupied by Ayers' character and has moved into the realm of being sexually desirable. Within the one film, Valentino has gone from being a surrogate female presence to being a representation of the masculine object of desire of the female audience.

Even though *The Son of the Sheik* is a sequel to *The Sheik*, the moral tone directed towards the female audience changes drastically.

Valentino now plays the son of the sheik, encountering the young and beautiful Yasmin, played by Vilma Banky. Though they initially fall in love, complications arise which

make the Valentino character begin to suspect Yasmin of betrayal. Similar to Diana in the previous film, Yasmin is constructed an adventurer at first. However she continues the earlier pattern by becoming victim to Valentino's predatory male gaze; an intense gaze just precedes the implied rape scene in the son of the sheik's chambers. Towards the end of the film however, Yasmin realises she truly does love Valentino's character despite the rape, a violation she seems oblivious to but something a contemporary audience cannot ignore. Even though both female

leads in the films are stripped of autonomy by Valentino, *The Son of The Sheik* goes much further in its restriction of women due to the physical manifestation of violence. It would appear that in the time between the two films, producers perhaps became aware of the turbulent power of the female audience. As a demographic, they radically revised what it meant to be a successful American man and since the leading figures in the movie industry at the time were men, this growing power of the female spectator began to undermine their position. Through using Valentino as a lure for

women to the cinema, *The Son of The Sheik* sought to teach the widest amount of women possible that an adventurous and autonomous woman would eventually be contained by a man, by one way or another. The icon and powerful figure that the female audience had created in Valentino was used against them as a way of restricting women's freedom even further.

Fig. 3. Valentino taming Agnes Ayres in *The Sheik*

Fig. 4. Valentino taming Vilma Banky in *The Son of The Sheik*

By examining the role of female spectatorship in silent film, one becomes more aware of the fact that films of all periods are produced around specific cultural movements and events, no films being made in a vacuum free of cultural influence. The relationship between the female viewing public and the producers of Hollywood film in the 20s becomes especially interesting when viewed through the cultural eyepiece. The industry as a whole seems to be about the suppression of women and the elevation of men, not through subtle or subversive forms, but through blatant exposition in the

most popular films of the time with the most adored film star, Valentino. Even though the women of the time may have shaped a new, ideal masculinity, the moviemakers of the time embraced the “new man” in order to further suppress the women that created it.